

**PERSUASIVE VERBS IN COMMISSIVE SPEECH ACTS: A DISCOURSE OF
SELECTED POLITICAL PARTY MANIFESTOS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Language is a social device used in accomplishing certain desirable objectives. In the field of politics, language is an essential condition for different campaign strategies geared towards winning elections. One of these strategies emphasises the key ideas that should entrench change. Language becomes a persisting course for presenting the ideological perceptions within the manifestos that the parties and their candidates propose to put across to the electorate whom they often persuade to align with their views of change. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how speech act applies to the language in use in communicating party manifestos. The study has adopted the speech act theory of John Searle as the theoretical framework for this research. In this regard, this work examines the manifestos of three prominent political parties in Nigeria : Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Congress (APC) and All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA). The data for this research were collected from the websites of these three political parties.

Introduction

The goal of language use in every given situation is not just to communicate but also to make a significant impression on the listeners or readers. Rhetoric is the aspect of language use that pertains to persuasion. In this regard, rhetoric draws on literary expressions that employ figures and symbols in locating specific referents. In other fields in which language is put to use, the choice and patterning of words are also carefully articulated to achieve the desired result. Therefore, it becomes necessary to study how words and language patterns are put to use in the meanings and messages that they are intended to convey, especially where there are certain persuasive intentions.

M.A.K. Halliday's proposes that "language is, in the first instance, a resource for making meaning" (1). Babatunde Opeibi cites Beard in asserting that political campaigns and their manifestos are of interest when examined from the linguistic perspective because they demonstrate how language is used to capture the intention of the aspirants thus:

...although political campaigns, with their speeches, their written texts, their broadcasts, need to inform and instruct voters about issues that are considered to be of great importance, ultimately all the written and spoken texts that are produced during an election campaign are designed to persuade people to do one thing: to vote in a certain way (147).

In this regard therefore, language is seen to play a pivotal role in the domain of politics. Language becomes a central process of presenting the ideological perceptions that the parties and their candidates will embody in order to sell them smoothly to the electorates. To this extent, language is adopted as a social product for consummating social actions. In their interactions, members of a given language community relive their experiences through speech and communication.

In the field of politics, language is put to use in different campaign strategies geared towards winning elections. One of these strategies is prominent in the entrenchment of the ideas for change in the political party manifestos. These political party manifestos bear utterances that are intended to persuade the electorate into voting their own party into power. The candidates, who are put forward to contest elections, are usually expected by their political parties to adopt the principles which the manifestos propose and translate them into individual ideologies and promises, as their posters and billboards are made to capture. The crucial role of language is seen at work in this regard. Opeibi posits again that “The way political or public officials talk and what they say determine how effective or successful they are in persuading the electorate and public to support their candidacy or political programmes” (146).

Language is put to use in capturing party manifestos, and sometimes, the ingenuity of each candidate might become manifest in how he/she is seen to enunciate ideas which the party may adopt as being part of its manifesto in subsequent times. In each campaign, the political parties project their ideologies to the people through the manifestos. In examining the effectiveness of the language used in persuading the electorates and the masses in the manifestos, it becomes necessary to examine the persuasive strategies put to use. In this regard, there is need to identify how power is sought, acquired, exercised and sustained through effective communication. In the discourse of persuasion, the language is seen to perform a social function. This reveals that politicians adopt language as a tool for their trade. So, it is illogical to think of any political activity that does not involve the use of language: speeches, newspaper editorials, press conferences, cabinet meetings, acts of parliament and so on.

This paper proceeds on the premise that language stands as a persisting force in achieving meaningful results. It is expected that the discourse of persuasion in the political party manifestos will reveal how effective persuasive language can be in influencing the masses and steering their minds towards accepting the propositions in the political party manifestos. The purpose of this study is to examine how language is used in communicating political party ideas and aspirations in order to achieve political objectives. In examining the language in use in the promises and commitments, attempt has been made to discover the persuasive strategies and their anticipated effects as embedded in each of the political party manifestos under discourse. The study here is also intended to discover the functional significance of speech acts, those of the commissive kind, and more importantly to examine how their effects on the electorates are enforced in the selected manifestos.

The discussion in this work is expected to reveal the patterns and choices of language as they are used in actualizing the desired effects in the manifestos. Since the work is intended to investigate how actions are accomplished through party manifestos, it is also expected to reveal the effectiveness or otherwise of the language as each political party manifesto is placed among the others.

Conceptual Framework

Discourse could be seen as an evaluation of certain forms of communication which include: discussions, speeches, sermons or talks which are meant to achieve specific purposes. In any of these communicative engagements, there are three key elements that come into focus. They include the message, the giver of the message and the receiver of the message. The implication is that discourse involves the analysis of arguments that pertain to the understanding of the effects and purposes of the form of communication under review. Therefore, discourse is a presentation of language use as an activity. It involves language in its functional sense, particularly in its situation of use.

In examining the coverage of discourse analysis, Moji Olateju cites Stubb's observation that discourse analysis is a study of "language above the sentence or above the clause" (8). It is in this regard that the consideration of context is seen to be crucial in the study of communication. In appreciating the context of a given utterance, it is the analysis of how the physical texts relate to the situation of use. In the instance here, a discourse of verbs becomes a prominent inclination of this study.

William O'Grady, John Archibald and Francis Katamba agree that the verb is "A lexical category that typically designates actions, sensations and states..." (653). For John I. Saeed, "verbs inherently describe different situation types. Some describe states, others are dynamic and describe processes and events" (119). Joy Eyisi observes that the verb is a "compulsory element of a sentence expressing an action done by the subject (the nominal) or a state experienced by the subject..." (49). Uchenna Uwakwe obviously corroborates Eyisi in observing that "every sentence requires a verb because it is the basic word that expresses the information..."(40-41). Halliday relates the grammatical placement of verbs in what he sees as "material clauses"(338), identifying how the concept of transitivity becomes a prominent evocation of discourse. In this regard, the verb is seen to be a key connecting word class among nouns and pronouns when they are interchanged. They also connect the functional imperatives of subjectivity and objectivity. At another level of discourse, the adverbial component of the sentence would most often rely on the verb for its choice and implication within each given context. The verb is therefore a pertinent lexical as well as grammatical element in any study requiring discourse.

Alexandria Georgakopoulou and Dionysius Goutsos see discourse from another perspective which is equally pertinent in the analysis of language use. To them:

the focus of discourse analysis is not on the ideas, thoughts, plans, goals etc, which exist independently of language. It is, instead, both on what is said or done in the text, a text's subject matter, and on how something is said, that is, the total of the language mechanisms and strategies that operate in discourse (8).

Barbara Johnstone asserts here: "What most people mean when they say "language' is talk, communication, discourse" (2). While Johnstone is not inclined to seeing language as being distinct from discourse, Deborah Schiffrin cites Fasold in affirming that "the study of discourse is the study of any aspect of language use" (31). This implies that the use of language involves a conscious activity with far reaching intentions. Language is adopted to convey meanings in a manner that prompts or drives the audience to engage in certain expected actions. In the words of Georgakopoulou and Goutsos:

Language form does not simply reflect our external reality, its entities and its relations. It is in fact, constitutive of that reality and our knowledge about it. The process of linguistic articulation shapes our perception of things. The understanding of how language works and the awareness of the repertoires available to people for constructing texts are thus crucial for examining how knowledge is constructed. (10-11)

It becomes logical to view discourse as the interpretation of the texts in the given context of language use and the analysis of the effects adopted with specific intentions in communication. Discourse therefore involves the study of communication as it pertains to the transmission and reception of messages which are intended to elicit a response. It is the kind of study that emphasises the properties of language that generate the response which is required in communication.

The study of persuasion in this paper is intended to examine the force which verbs bear in language use. Particularly, it is to interrogate the choice of verbs in certain contexts and how they are adopted in performing specific purposes. Since language serves as a medium of affecting people's thoughts and consequently their behaviour, the choice of verb within sentence patterns has become a provoking area of study. It becomes imperative to engage in such study so as to unravel how the persuasive objectives are realised through preferred verb forms.

Persuasion may be defined as an intentional application of force in language use in order to motivate, impress or convince a given audience. A.S. Hornby gives a view of persuasion that relates to this study where he observes that persuasion arises out of "a set of beliefs, especially about religion or politics" (1094). It is the intensity of the force in the use of language that distinguishes the act of persuasion from the act of convincing. Persuasion is profoundly elucidated in what Timothy Crusius and Carolyn Channel regard as "convincing plus" (25). In explaining what they mean, they insist that:

Persuasion, then, aims to close the gap between assent and action. Because persuasion seeks a deeper and stronger commitment from readers, it appeals to the whole person, to our full humanity not just to the mind (25).

Crusius and Channel affirm that "understanding of rhetorical context comes from both external and internal clues – information outside the text and information you gather as you read and re read it" (26).

Manifestos are mostly viewed to be relevant in the domain of politics. It becomes necessary to examine how manifestos drive the campaign activities by political parties. Therefore, the principles in the manifestos under study provide the contents of the discussion here, being the means by which the parties sell their aspirants and the ideologies they promote. Manifestos are texts that are intended to declare the ideas, values and intentions of the association or organization from which each proceeds. J.A.Cuddon identifies manifesto as "A public declaration, usually of political, religious, philosophical or literary principles and beliefs" (420). Hornby says that a manifesto is "a written statement in which a group of people, especially a political party, explain their beliefs and say what they will do if they win an election" (905).

Facts that pertain to manifestos which are deducible in these definitions include that they are written declarations of ideas and intentions with which an association is identified. Again, manifestos appear to have become more closely associated with political parties than other forms of organizations. In the views of Odell et al, we find a seemingly more elaborate

presentation of persuasive strategies in texts. They emphasise that language has become a key determinant of how the society is run.

To make the most out of your persuasive speech, you should use effective language, language that is appropriate for your purpose and audience. Because a speech is spoken language, the audience must be able to understand it immediately. You should, therefore, choose simple, familiar words that communicate your exact meaning in a straightforward manner (320).

Odell et al emphasise that it is the appropriateness of the tone which generates the verbal effect within a written text. It is the tone in any discourse that yields the kind of connection between the subject and the audience.

Theoretical Base

This work adopts John Searle's speech act theory as its theoretical framework. The theory was originally propounded by John Langshaw Austin, a British philosopher of language following his lecture, 'How to Do Things with Words' at the Harvard University in 1955. In 1969, the theory was expanded by an American Philosopher John Searle. It is in this expanded work that Searle locates the five (5) classifications of the illocutionary speech acts adopted as the basis for analysis in this work.

The speech act theory was designed to elucidate how utterances are used in relation to the speaker's and hearer's attitudes in communication. It is in this light that what is said (by the speaker) generates a persuasive effect (on the hearer). We find in Austin's presentation that utterances bear the actions which the presenters intend them to accomplish. What Austin calls the performatives is captured thus:

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short 'a performative'. The term 'performative' will be used in a number of cognate ways and constructions, much as the term 'imperative' is. The name derived, of course, from 'perform', the usual verb with the noun 'action': it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something (6-7).

Nozar Niazi and Rama Gautam affirm that Austin is more inclined to projecting how actions are accomplished with words than the truth conditions of what is spoken. Niazi and Gautam put it this way: "to demolish the perspective of language that would consider 'truth conditions' as central to language understanding" (195-196). The explanation which Niazi and Gautam give to Austin's title, 'How to Do Things with Words', is that it is the verb that generates the force which language bears. It has been noted that political discourse involves giving information with an intention to persuade the masses to participate in political events. In the bid to achieve this objective, the language in use is carefully selected. Both the lexical choices and their combinations are made to form structures that are crafted in a manner that the force is sufficient to trigger certain actions among the masses – the audience. In this regard, we find how fitting the theory becomes in such political discourse as manifestos.

Speech act pertains to an utterance which in its appropriate circumstance is used to perform an action. To R.A. Hudson, speech acts relate to actions in the form of requests, greetings, commands, statements and confirmations. Hudson observes that the actions which speech acts actualise are culture bound. In justifying this explanation, Hudson relates some of such cultural properties as greeting and blessing thus: "Although greetings and farewells

(presumably) exist in all languages, they also vary enormously from language to language..., so close translation equivalents are often hard to find” (132). In affirming this, Niazi and Gautam insist that cultural specificity could be seen from the point that speech acts “depend on legal, religious or ethical conventions and practices institutionalised in particular societies” (196).

Searle gives a breakdown of the rules which he categorizes into the five illocutionary speech acts: assertive, expressive, directives, commissive and declaratives. By implication, Searle’s speech act also touches on Austin’s locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Commissives are utterances that indicate the speaker’s willingness or commitment to accomplish a future action. Niazi and Gautam identify commissives with “promise, pledge, refusal and threat” (207). Examples that capture commissives include:

We shall stand by whatever decision you take.

I have to pay your arrears this week.

I will not accept his excuses any longer.

The method of collecting the data for this research is through the Internet. These texts of the manifestos of the three political parties under study are found on their websites. The method of data analysis is descriptive. It analyses the texts of the manifestos to unveil the patterns of the in adopting commissive speech acts. While the concept is fall within the illocutionary act, it is imperative to see how commissives align with such concepts as locutionary acts and perlocutionary acts. Particularly, the persuasive force of verbs in the political party manifestos under study has been investigated.

Data Analysis

It has already been identified that this paper adopts John Searle’s expansion of speech act. Therefore, Searle’s classification forms the basis for the isolation of commissive speech acts in the presentation of the data, and the discussions are also segmented along the same categories. The texts that are derived in the data presentation, which are extracts from the manifestos of the three political parties (APC, APGA and PDP) are basically reflective of commissive speech acts. Therefore, the preceding analysis recollects the persuasive effects of the verbs as they are expected to impact on the electorates.

Texts of Commissive Speech Acts

APC 1-15

- (1) We will create new job opportunities through a massive public works programme especially the building of a national railway system of inter-state and ports.... We will target the creation of 3 million new jobs a year through industrialization, public works and agricultural expansion.
- (2) We will build a network of local and mobile clinics
- (3) We will triple education spending over the next 10 years, from the current 8.5% to 24.5%
- (4) The new APC government will diversify our economy by developing long neglected sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture
- (5) The new APC government will set about the urgent task of getting Nigeria’s public finances in order, by tackling the massive waste and corruption in the system...

APGA 6-10

- (6) APGA will sponsor public enlightenment programmes to fight gender inequality and gender insensitivities in every aspect of our national life.
- (7) APGA will ensure that the salaries and other entitlements of workers are paid as and when due.
- (8) APGA will promote research for new building technologies to reduce cost.
- (9) APGA will commercialize the Nigerian Airways immediately and gradually position the undertaking for privatization.
- (10) APGA will encourage employers, Local Government Council and private entrepreneurs, using the low interest housing fund to create low cost estates for sale to the public

PDP 11-15

- (11) PDP in government shall reorganize the NYSC Scheme to embrace all graduates of post secondary institutions; and shall promote and encourage societies/clubs such as Boy Scout, Debating society, etc...
- (12) PDP government shall ensure that the country's steel rolling mills operate at full capacity.
- (13) PDP government shall facilitate the access to cheaper and better agricultural inputs, including farm tools, chemicals, fertilizers, improved seedlings and livestock breeds.
- (14) PDP in government shall ensure that all Nigerians, particularly the young and the aged shall have access to free medical services.
- (15) PDP in government shall ensure that the educational system is improved upon; ultimately provide free education at all levels

The commissive speech acts in the political party manifestos (Texts 1-15) basically demonstrate the commitment of the parties under study to a course of action in the future. The implication of the future here is clearly suggested in the pledge to accomplish certain actions when entrusted with authority. Commissives implicate the commitment and indicate that the speaker is under a given obligation to do something.

Text 4: ...APC government will diversify our economy...

Text 10: APGA will encourage employers

Text 15: PDP in government shall ...ultimately provide free education at all levels

In these commissive speech acts, the parties present their promises to the electorate in soliciting their votes in the elections. It becomes imperative to examine these texts of commissive speech acts with a view to investigating the extent to which they validate these manifestos as a forceful manipulative strategies. Maeve Cooke insists that the act of promising and requesting are particularly enforced by performative verbs (62). Such performatives in (Texts 1-15) include: 'create/target', 'build', 'diversify', 'sponsor', 'ensure', 'promote', 'commercialize', 'encourage', 'reorganize', 'facilitate' and 'provide'. These specific actions that are meant to be accomplished by the political party whose manifesto is presented, mostly denote the change which the presenters intend to bring about.

The inclination to the use of performative verbs relates to what Halliday sees as "material clause process of doing and happening" (224). It is evident in the texts of the commissive speech acts presented in the three political parties under study that the performatives (verbs) are made more explicit by the accompaniment of fitting modal auxiliaries. These are exemplified here: will create, will target, will build, will triple, will diversify, will set up, will sponsor, will ensure, will promote, will commercialize, will encourage, shall reorganize, shall ensure, shall facilitate, shall ultimately provide, etc. Ogunsiji and Olaosun recognize that,

“An utterance is explicitly performative when it contains a performative verb, which overtly states the intended force of the utterance”(171). The grammatical implication of each usage justifies the force which the party intends to accomplish. The modal auxiliaries found in the texts (1-15) show how meaning could be embedded in their collocation with certain performative verbs. Regarding modal auxiliaries, M.A. Yadugiri insists that they are used to, ...convey two types of meanings (i) to indicate human control of the situation in the form of giving or asking for permission or expressing obligation and (ii) to make some kind of judgement about the truth of a statement in terms of possibility or necessity (315).

In the collocation of the auxiliaries and the performative verbs, the control of transformation of the existing situation is made more imperative by the force of the commissives which the manifestos bear – ‘shall reorganize’, ‘shall ensure’. It is seen therefore that there is a conscious application of both the auxiliary and main verbs in expressing the commitment in the manifestos

Diri Teilanyo is particular about the grammaticality of the collocation of both the subject and auxiliary, and the auxiliary and the lexical verb. He puts it thus: “In other words, we expect not only S-Aux concord but also Aux-V concord” (302). To this extent, the views of Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum on modal auxiliaries relate to the manner in which the actors in the presentation of manifestos express their obligation to the people meaningfully. According to Quirk and Greenbaum, modal auxiliaries can be used by different speakers for different purposes. They could be used to express: ability, permission, possibility, willingness, intention, insistence, obligation, prediction and probability (64-66). The texts of the commissives are replete with ‘will’ and ‘shall’.

In the APC manifesto, the use of ‘will’ is found in these texts:

- Text 1: We will create new jobs (insistence/willingness)
- Text 1: We will target the creation of 3 million jobs (possibility)
- Text 2: We will build a network of local and mobile clinics (obligation)
- Text 3: We will triple education spending (possibility/willingness)

In recognition of the possibility, their obligation and willingness to bring about a change, the texts of the APC manifesto capture how promises are made to the electorate. The promises come as a sequel to the affirmations of the state of such situations as unemployment, health facilities and the education sector. It is also a promise to retract from the nonchalant attitude of the incumbent government.

The use of ‘will’ which receives a greater force in the first person is seen in the repeated use of ‘We’ and ‘will’. According to J.D. Murthy, ‘will’ is used to express determination, promise, threat, willingness in the first person” (137). The people are persuaded that the political party is determined to accomplish the promises. The electorate is left to infer that it is their support that ought to bring these promises about.

In the APGA manifesto, the use of the modal auxiliary ‘will’ stands to bear the same purpose. Rather than use the first person pronoun ‘we’ as found in the APC manifesto, the acronym, APGA occurs as the first person.

- Text 1: We will create new job... (insistence/willingness) - APC
- Text 6: APGA will sponsor public enlightenment
- Text 7: APGA will ensure salaries and entitlements
- Text 8: APGA will promote ...

Text 9: APGA will commercialize...

The choice of the name, APGA in place of the first person does not suppose the third person (referent), but a kind of reflexive actor. In this regard, the use of APGA intensifies the commitment. It is very much like ‘We, APGA will’ accomplish our promise. It further certifies that the promises as they are listed are coming from a political party with a trusted name. In the repetition of this acronym APGA, a great measure of affectation is generated for each of the items of promise which the name emphasizes. Mudd and Sillars agree that: “if communication is affective it should therefore be considered at least to some degree to be persuasive” (345).

In the texts of the PDP manifesto presented, there is a prominent use of the modal auxiliary ‘shall’. However, because it is used with the third person actor, its persuasive force is also fortified.

Text 11: PDP in government shall reorganize the NYSC scheme to embrace all graduates...

Text 12: PDP government shall facilitate the access to cheaper and better agricultural inputs...

Text 14: PDP in government shall ensure that all Nigerians, particularly the young and aged should have access to free medical services...

The fact that ‘shall’ is used in the second and the third person to express a command, a promise, or a threat justifies its appropriateness in the context of what the other political parties intend to achieve with ‘will’. Therefore, the use of ‘shall’ achieves the dual function of stating the commitment of the promise and implying the responsibility of the promisee (the people) in equipping the promise to be able to accomplish the promise. The use of ‘PDP in government’ in this context implies, PDP given the authority or PDP empowered by the votes of the electorate or PDP with your mandate. Quirk and Greenbaum assert that the conscious use of shall indicates “willingness on the part of the speaker in 2nd and 3rd persons” (66).

It is in repeating the actor ‘PDP in government’, and the modal ‘shall’ that the promise is intensified in persuading the people. It is logical to state that the commissive speech acts bear perlocutionary force. The adoption of ‘shall’ and ‘will’ in persuasive utterances not only makes expressions clear but more importantly forceful. Therefore, the use of ‘shall’ and ‘will’ in texts 1-15 communicates the promises and how obligatory they are to the promiser.

The key patterns of the commissive speech acts in the three political party manifestos are found in the use of the performative verbs and the modal auxiliaries ‘shall’ and ‘will’. The use of repetition generates its own perlocutionary force. The frequency of the performative verb ‘ensure’ relates to the commitment of the promise. Each of these modals ‘shall’ and ‘will’ was made to recur in the manifestos as the presenters deem them suitable to the intended force of each persuasive intention.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the force of verbs as commissive speech acts and how the benefits of persuasion are employed in the political party manifestos adopted for this study. Drawing from the strategies in the language of these manifestos, the paper has discovered how the adoption of lexical and auxiliary verbs as well as their patterning are employed to mobilize, motivate, impress and convince the people to align with political strategies. Just as Crusius

and Channel observe, “persuasion attempts to influence not just thinking but also behavior. It motivates”(17). It is in this regard that this paper justifies how the commissive speech acts perform these persuasive objectives.

It has been observed in the analysis that the choice of modal auxiliaries ‘shall’ and ‘will’ have been carefully made to agree with the subject which gives it the force it requires in persuading the people. These subjects include: PDP in government, PDP government, The new APC government, APC and APGA. While these appear to be in the third person, they are made to agree with the same modals, ‘will’ as it is with the first person plural ‘we’. In each presentation, the same force of commitment is realized.

In this light, it is valid to submit that this work has given an extensive justification that Searle’s identification with commissives as a prominent speech act provides sufficient tools in locating how the political party manifestos have been articulated to make a persuasive impact on the electorate. This has been achieved by not only locating how these manifestos align with each of the commissives, but also how forcefully the language could be appreciated in each instance of use.

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